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Magdalena Buchczyk

DRAFT Dressing and undressing the house: rethinking objects in and out of the households

Abstract:

Based on anthropological fieldwork with a museum collection, this article discusses the changing nature of the rural household in central Romania. Through a detailed examination of the interiors it provides an understanding of the local perspectives on the traditional households. Tracing the historical process of undressing and remaking this space, the article highlights the shifting local attitudes towards domesticity and different sentiments towards the house represented by source communities and museum professionals. It aims to illuminate the contrasting time-spaces in which rural households are embedded and to provide a context for rethinking this material in the museum setting.

Keywords: interior decoration, material culture, household, chronotope, ethnography

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Key research interests: heritage and material culture, curating, urban anthropology, design and innovation research

Introduction

The arrival of the Bucharest Folk Art Museum curator in the village of Viştea, Central Romania in 1954 resulted in a remarkable acquisition. Rushing to collect objects for the Horniman Museum, she was met with a particularly responsive community and was able to move through the village as if walking across a marketplace. In a few weeks later, she returned to Bucharest with suitcases packed with over a hundred artefacts. The objects included pieces of wooden furniture, homemade textiles embellishing the walls, tables and beds, pieces of pottery, as well as objects of symbolic value such as dowry chests and religious icons. This rich collection was a slice of the traditional peasant domestic aesthetics of the time.

This article draws on my doctoral research in Viştea undertaken in the summer of 2012 as part of a wider study reassessing the collection. Drawing on an anthropological study conducted with the 1957 Horniman Museum Romanian collection, it focuses on domestic objects within the village household. It provides a historical account of the house within the sphere of Romanian museum practice. Using ethnographic research in central Romania, it highlights local understandings of the domestic space and its change over time.

The approach used for this research involved archival and ethnographic study as well as visual methods. In 1955, the Horniman Museum was sent models of displays to represent the traditional cottage interior in the exhibition space. The images were used (*see Fig.1.10 and 1.11*) in photo elicitation in order to evoke the perspectives of Viştea residents concerning the organization of objects in the house and museum displays. Through discussions with museum curators and residents of the village, I explored the changing domestic environment and the sentiments towards household material culture, remnants of the past and the everyday objects represented by the collection. In addition to the photo

elicitation techniques, I used ethnographic interviews and guided walks as a method of sensing history and activating narratives about objects and spaces (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, Jones et al. 2008, Richardson 2007). These allowed to explore the unconsidered spatialized stories about the historical transformations and the contemporary significance of the home.

In this analysis of the built environment in Viştea, I intend to contribute to literature on the material culture studies of the home. A wide range of research revealed that domestic objects and home decorations constitute a dynamic relationship between remembering and forgetting and illuminate notions of kinship and gender as well as local symbolic categories (Carsten and Hugh Jones 1995, Empson 2006, Grossman 2015, Iuga 2011, Reynolds 2012). Following Levi-Strauss, studies considered the house as a “corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth” (Levi-Strauss 1983: 174) and explored the relations between the fabric of social organisation, local identity and shifting idioms of household (Pine 1996, 2002). Given the linkages between social fabric and material culture, scholars of dynamic processes which rule the house in periods of change, revealed how the physical form of the dwelling and objects within and around the household bring insights into how social categories and local identities were maintained, contested and transformed. A number of studies conducted in East European contexts explored these shifting idioms of household and the dynamics between the memory, identity, and relatedness (Humphrey 1974, 2002, Iuga 2010, Kaneff 1998, Kligman 1988, Kligman and Verdery 2011).

Research into domesticity and homemaking highlighted the constitution and transformation of households and brought nuance about changing sentiments towards the domestic. Research explored the fine detail of the attitudes towards the home as well as the

dynamic constructions of cosiness, comfort, normality, taste and kitsch (Boym 1994, Buchli 1997, Drazin 2002, Fehérváry 2002, Garvey 2003, Miller 2001, Kettering 1997, Rausing 2002, Reid 2009, Øye 2007). Anthropological research has demonstrated that built form is deeply related to issues of embodiment, providing opportunities for the analysis of the entanglement of the house, body, personhood and kinship (Bourdieu 1990, Bloch 1995, Hugh-Jones 1985, Buchli 2013, Gell 1998, Blier 1995, Makovsky 2014).

Drawing on the above areas of research, I focus on the changing practices of homemaking in Central Romania. Here, rather than highlighting issues of the production of the domestic material culture and its changes (see Buchczyk 2014) or examining idioms of kinship and relatedness embedded in the rural household (Makovsky 2007, Posey 2005), I attempt to provide an account of the different ways of framing the domestic environment in time and space. I argue that the house and the village are situated in certain chronotopes in which narratives are being constructed. According to Bakhtin, space evokes a sense of time of varying qualities where:

spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh ... likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history (Bakhtin 1981: 84).

Discussing the chronotopes of Viştea domestic material culture in the museum and the old household (*casa veche*), I highlight that the attitudes towards domesticity are constructed in a historical process and form a part of divergent attitudes and narrative frameworks. The article aims to illuminate the contrasting time-spaces in which rural households are embedded and to provide a new context for rethinking the domestic objects in the museum setting. It is argued that the understanding of the local riddance of

objects equivalent to the museum material provides a fruitful background for their museum reinterpretation today.

Spatializing curatorial sentiments

The representation of the rural domestic space had a long history in the Romanian museum practice. In order to understand the context in which objects from the Viștea's old houses were collected, I will demonstrate the historical context of acquiring and displaying rural material culture. This brief historical overview allows reassessing the 1957 Horniman Museum collection in the context of its role in the museum space and the affective qualities asserted on its collectors.

Since the establishment of the first early 20th century museums in Romania, rural domestic spaces and vernacular aesthetics have been key elements of exhibition making. In 1907, the first public museum in Bucharest, the Museum of National Art, displayed rural architecture with a reconstruction of the house of Mogoș, a rural craftsman. The exhibition of this emblematic building initiated a process of encyclopedic collecting

with an aim of gradually creating a complete picture of Romanian folk architecture by region. The project, inspired by the open-air museum at Skansen (1891), was not to come to fruition. However, the idea was preserved, and in 1936 it finally came into being in the form of the Museum of the Romanian Village (Popescu 2000: 39).

Painting the picture of the nation through a comprehensive assemblage of traditional houses was key to that original moment of museum making, and since then, the peasant interior became key to the iconography of Romania within the country and outside its borders. Whereas in Romania, peasant architecture played a central role in the renewal of applied and decorative arts (Popescu 2011), abroad it was at the fore of international exhibitions

aiming at enhancing the country's self-image. One of the first representations took place in 1911, when a replica of the Mogoș house became part of the Romanian Pavilion of the International Exhibition in Rome. Folkloric architecture was also a pivotal part of the designs of the pavilions exhibited in Barcelona (1929) and New York (1939) (Popescu 2010).

The rules of showcasing Romanian peasant households in museums were set out by the exhibition practices of the Village Museum in Bucharest. This was an emblematic institution, an open-air museum made with dismantled rural architecture reassembled in the capital. The creation of the scientifically oriented Museum of the Romanian Village was linked to the program of the Bucharest sociological school, conducting monographic studies across the countryside in the interwar period¹ (Radu 2007). For Dimitrie Gusti, the founder of the school, village monographs were the building blocks of a positive science of society, one that

must constitute itself as the science of the nation. It will determine for it the ethics and politics through which the people will find its true road to self-realization (Gusti 1940: 64).

In the 1930s, Gusti acted as commissar general for the Romanian pavilions at the international exhibitions in Paris (1937) and New York (1939).²



Fig. 1.1. Draguș interior displayed in the Village Museum in Bucharest. Courtesy of the Village Museum.

The Gusti School and their monographic and exhibition-making activities have left a long-standing legacy on the conceptualizations of domestic space and local vernacular architecture in Romanian museum practice. The image above (**Fig. 1.1.**) shows a peasant interior from the village of Draguș, the neighboring village to Viștea and the site of one of the most extensive monographic campaigns of the sociological school (Rostas 2000). The Draguș household, brought back from the campaign and representing the ethnographic area of Făgăraș Land, has been on display since 1936 and continues to serve as an emblem of the Village Museum in Bucharest.

Since Gusti's acquisition, the style of the Făgăraș district became key to the intellectual tradition of Romanian sociology, ethnography and museum work. Educated by the founding texts of the monographs and informed by the blueprint of the Village Museum household, consecutive generations of social scientists and curators visited the area, exploring various aspects of the local custom and material folklore. As the archive of publications on the Făgăraș district was growing, museums were increasingly interested in obtaining artefacts from the area. In this way, the district became one of the most represented spaces in museum displays and sources of emblematic peasant material culture in Romanian ethnography. At the same time, as these artefacts made their way abroad amid

the flow of exported folk art, it stood for the metonymy of Romanian peasant interior (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Făgăraș Land became one of the primary homelands and emblematic places for sourcing folk art from rural communities.

The Arcadian spell casted by these artefacts has a strong presence in these representations:

These interiors of peasant houses, so bright and picturesque, give one a feeling of comfort. Long years of experience have taught people to arrange the objects according to the requirements; as to the wealth of artistic elements employed in the decoration of the interior, it creates a charming and cozy atmosphere (*Folk Art in Rumania* 1955: 9).

The above curatorial narrative shows the ways in which the peasant interior evoked Arcadian sentiments of the skillful peasant past, rural creativity and atmosphere of charm and comfort. These cozy and intimate spaces were reproduced throughout the country as part of a national museological policy. Under socialism, as open air museums were being set up in several towns, whole houses and various domestic items from numerous historical periods were brought to the Romanian cities for encyclopedic and aestheticized displays of rural spaces. The coziness of the intimate rural interiors was deeply embedded in the nationalist agenda of the time. Kligman's (1988) ethnography of Northern Romania under socialism explored the reproduction of the state and nationalist discourse through folklore and cultural heritage. For Kligman,

folklore is viewed as a viable modality through which the specificities of a national heritage may be constituted and communicated. Folklore and traditions serve as cultural signs of difference that represent nationalist ideology and mystify the 'other'.

Hence, 'socialist culture' from the perspective of cultural ideologues attempts to articulate various levels of identity – individual, regional, national – by reifying a complex of concepts that constitute a national cultural identity constructed in 'familial' terms. *Patrie* (fatherland or nation) is the symbolic family of people. Through this symbolic construction of an encompassing context, the state legitimizes itself and, in the process, encourages the transformation of peasants into Rumanians (Kligman 1988: 258).

Although the persistent entanglement between Romanian folklore, museum practice and politics is well documented (Bubociu 1966, Hedeşan 2000, Hedeşan, and Mihăilescu 2006, Ionescu-Gura 2005, Mihăilescu 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Rostas 2000), less has been written about the ways artefacts activated affective qualities of nationalism and Arcadian aesthetics. In curatorial stories, objects were at the intersection between the intimacy of the fatherland and the state strategy. This aesthetic sentiment is clearly demonstrated in museum literature. For example, the 1959 catalogue of the Village Museum in Bucharest presents the visit of the museum "a pleasant and exceptionally instructive stroll through the Rumanian rural landscape". (Focşa 1959:10). In museum writing, Romanian peasant households often evoke a sense of national aesthetic capacity and ideas of taste. As Georgeta Stoica argued:

It may be said that "a taste for beauty made up of distinct parts", characteristic of the feelings of Romance people, is obviously seen in the Romanian peasant house. The preference for placing decorative objects in colored friezes alternating with blank, white spaces, and a certain arrangement of the furniture, point precisely to this taste and is a general feature of the Romanian people, regardless of the regional differences (Stoica 1984: 47)

This national sense of taste, Stoica suggested, is interlinked with ideas of comfort embedded in the Romanian peasant household (1984: 48).

During an interview with the octogenarian curator of the Museum of Folk Art in Bucharest who participated in the acquisition of the 1957 Horniman Museum collection, she particularly admired the aesthetic qualities of the cottages:

“in general, these house interiors are very hospitable. When you enter the house, the first thing you see is the bench covered with the colorful cloth; there are icons and pots on the wall ... it’s very pleasant.”

Her 1954 journey to Viştea in search of the artefacts combined a need for acquiring the most aesthetic as well as locally and nationally representative pieces. As this brief review demonstrated, Viştea and the neighboring Draguş were an obvious source of material, ready to be sourced for a number of acquisitions and curatorial visits. In this context, the cottage of the Făgăraş district became a pivotal emblem of the national rural house within the aesthetic categories of rural material culture. As I will show below, the sentiments of the curators do not match the local understandings of this material culture. Discussions about the domestic spaces with the villagers tell us about attitudes that significantly differ from the curatorial views.

Dressed ruins: Remembering and forgetting domestic displays

When I asked my respondents in Viştea to show me the traditional wooden houses, they reacted with consternation. There was nothing to see in the village, I heard, just some ruins. People’s lives have moved on. Why, my respondents asked, was I to explore the few derelict households, locked away and rendered obsolete? Why not go to a local museum instead?

This section focuses on the absent present of the derelict overgrown houses (Buchli and Lucas 2002) cluttered with stored grain and abandoned for new buildings. I present the narratives arising from discussions about the space of the old house and the past domestic material culture. Exploring the cottage ruins in guided walks with the owners provided a nuanced context for resituating the museum artefacts within the emic understandings of the changing material culture.

On a summer afternoon day, octogenarian Irina sat in her garden, telling me about her childhood and youth in the village. She had a vivid memory of the 1950s Viştea:

“It was a hard life back then. People started to modernize after the war, created houses made of brick... earlier, all houses were made of wood, decorated in an identical way. That was the custom.”

Currently, there are a few wooden cottages, all disused and locked down. The best-preserved buildings representing the form of domestic environment similar to the one encountered by the museum collector in 1954 are situated at the far edge of the village in the Viştea Mare valley, close to the foothills of the Făgăraş Mountains. The hamlet of Viştişoara sits around four kilometers from the center of Viştea and consists of around twenty houses along the road between Sâmbata de Sus Monastery and the town of Victoria. At present, only two or three families reside there throughout the year, the rest of the houses belonging to seasonal occupants. The two rare examples of remaining old houses in Viştişoara are still kept in an original condition as their elderly residents only passed away recently.



Fig. 1.2. Sorin and Mama Tave outside the house (left)

Fig. 1.3. *Chindeu* hanging adorning the icon (right)

Mama Live's house represented a large version of the traditional household, with two rooms and a cellar transformed into an additional bedroom. Her home was built in the 1920s by "American money" a common example of migration from the region in the early twentieth century. Walking into the interior, octogenarian Mama Tave, a friend of the deceased owner, pointed me to images on the walls. She explained that the icons were adorned either with one piece of textile, highly decorated at the ends, draped over the icon, or two pieces alongside it. This type of fabric (*chindeu*) was referred to as having the 'body' (*cu trup*) or, in the case of the two pieces alongside the icon – 'without the body' (*fâra trup*). In the case of the lack a 'body', women occasionally added another textile on top of the display, a rectangular hanging (*cârpa*) folded in a bow-shaped 'butterfly' (*fluture*). This system of ornamentation was applied to family photos, remembering those who passed away or worked abroad. In the house, we could see displays of portraits of the distant family members in their festive traditional dress and in front of their American houses and cars.



Fig. 1.4. Room with a typical textile composition of *peretar* (long piece horizontally placed behind the bed), *chindee* (longer items, adorning photographs, windows or icons) and *cârpe* (at the ceiling, with visible two red endings) (left)

Fig. 1.5. Room with a bench covered with the *tol* blanket, checked *peretar* and various *chindee*. The small bow-like pieces are called butterflies, adding a 'body' to the *chindee* (right)

Walking through the room, Mama Tave pointed to other combinations of textiles in the interior, emphasizing that a similar type of ornamentation characterized all houses. Before Christmas, the house was dressed (*casa îmbracata*) more elaborately in a fresh set of textiles (for a comparative case of *casa îmbracata* in Northern Transylvania see: Iuga 2010). The stories of elaborate decoration were accompanied by narratives of poverty. Pointing at decorative plates adorning the walls, Mama Tave explained that these were used only during festive meals. On a daily basis, family members often ate from the same plate. She remembered the past as a period of constant work, Sisyphean labor in the fields and the house.



Fig. 1.6. Interior of the small house in Viștișoara

“This is the way things were placed around the house” – Mama Tave explained when we entered the second building. This smaller structure in Viștișoara was an outbuilding (*casuță*) opposite the main household built to house the family elderly. It consisted of one room and a hall with a stove. In the living room, the bed was covered with a checkered blanket (*strai*) and pillows with a decorative woven ‘face’ (*fața*) and a striped ‘body’ (*trup*). Icons and photographs on the walls were dressed with *chindeu* hangings, both with the upper ‘body’ and in the ‘butterfly’ assemblage (without the body). Pots were hung on the long beam at the top of the wall and although there were no textiles attached to it (due to the small size of the room), there were a couple of additional butterflies to cover the top of the wall space.



Fig. 1.7. Mrs Codrea showing me into the house (left)



Fig. 1.8. A room with a colourful tablecloth, hand-woven by Mrs Codrea in the new style. In the background, various images with *chindee without the body* and a long *cârpa* wall hanging on top

The last old house visited was situated in Viștea de Sus, belonging to Mrs Codrea, who now lived with her grandchildren in a newly built house on the opposite side of the road. Currently used as storage, this two-bedroom cottage remained dressed. The rooms were characterized by a similar system of furnishings with a bed, a table, a bench and textile decoration on the walls. Pottery was not hung on the walls but stored in a kitchen cupboard. The first room served as a kitchen (**Fig.1.9**). The central object in this space was a fridge, a present from her daughter who used to work in Austria. The second room

appeared more traditional with a row of wall hangings and *chindeu* textiles adorning the images (**Fig.1.8**). The benches were painted light blue, creating a lively contrast with the colorful tablecloth. Mrs Codrea made most of the textiles herself as did most women in the village (Buchczyk 2014). The most prominent object in her story, however, was the fridge – first present brought her family working in Austria, an object that significantly improved her life. There was little sentiment about the beautifully woven pieces of cloth – this is just what everybody did, she said.



Fig. 1.9. Interior of the first room with a fridge from Austria, *chindeu* ‘with a body’ adorning the icon and horizontal *cârpa*



Fig. 1.10. Display design, Horniman Museum collection. Courtesy of the Horniman Museum.

Fig. 1.11. Exhibition arrangement of the Viştea collection in 1957. Courtesy of the Horniman Museum.

In Viștea today, the conversations repeatedly emphasized the importance of the correct way of decorating the old house. Angela, the granddaughter of a recently deceased owner of a wooden cottage in the valley lives in a brick building next door. The interior of her living room is modern and minimal, although she keeps a few pieces of cloth made by her grandmother. She remembers her grandmother as a very diligent woman, very specific about the arrangement of her domestic interior. As a young girl, she used to help her grandmother with house chores but she was never able to get it right. She was always criticized for rearranging textiles around the interior and placing objects in the wrong order.

The ideas of specific order of objects became part of numerous discussions. Walking around the forgotten cottages, my guides pointed to elements of domestic display as the fragmentary remnants of the systematic arrangements. The organization of rural domestic interiors has been noted in Romanian ethnography in a range of studies and regional and comparative monographs illuminating various types of peasant households linked to the corresponding ethnographic regions (Iuga 2011, Stahl 1958, Stoica 1984). For Stoica, rural interiors express the complexities of historical change and general and particular cultural identities, revealing

on the one hand, the socio-economic conditions that gave rise to a certain arrangement and, on the other, the aesthetic conception of the community and the aesthetic sense – ultimately, the preferences – of the man or woman who arranged it (Stoica 1984: 39).

Ethnographic research has provided rich case studies of the arrangement and dynamics of the ‘good rooms’ and their continuing role in home-making (Avram 2004, Iuga 2010). Often framed as the ‘best room’, the cottage interior was discussed in the context of the ritual rhythm in which it participated and its role in the maintenance of intra-

household networks and practices of kinship (Posey 2005). Rather than discussing the propensity of house arrangements to elicit memories and notions of relatedness (Makovicky 2007, Grossman 2015), here focus on the narratives evoked by displays in the ruined houses. The local narratives in contemporary Viştea highlight that the spatial organisation of the old house (*casa veche*) communicated links between the built environment and the body.

The specificity of the systematic organization of the interiors became particularly evident in the case of textiles. In the old house, fabrics covered the surfaces of the interior, walls, beds and tables, forming a prescribed ensemble of objects marking the space. During the walks in the remaining old interiors and the photo elicitation sessions, textiles were often described in language that related to body parts. It was interesting to note in these descriptions that tablecloths and pillowcases had ‘faces’ (*fața*), *chindeu* wall hangings could be ‘with or without the body’ (*trup*). As pointed out by respondents in Viştea and Viştişoara, the old household used to be ‘beautified’ (*casa împodobita*) and ‘dressed’ (*casa îmbracata*) with icons, pottery and textiles. The composition of textiles and coverage of surfaces around the room was an act of adornment that produced a specific sensual effect on the visitor and demonstrated the impressive technical efficacy of a clean job, pattern making, the complexity of the design and the colorful richness of the motif. The interior with objects of body-like qualities served as a symbol of domesticity and the materialization of gendered skills to be presented to other members of the village. Dressing the house through the visual assemblage of objects around the interior was an organic whole and a metaphor of the body of work and the maker of the space.

Soft furnishings, often perceived as ephemeral detail and as a gendered domain, are enmeshed in the social production of the everyday, generating a range of

spatial effects and pointing to complex normative contexts (Grier 1996, Gordon 1996, Kinchin 1996, Martinez and Ames 1997, McNeil 1994, Petty 2012). Makovicky's (2014) ethnography in Poland demonstrated how sartorial elements of the rural household reflected gendered categories and created a 'social skin', signaling social conformity. Wrapping the interiors in Viștea bore similarity with Koniaków as a practice of home-making and belonging but also an arena of individual distinction. The conversations about the 'old houses' highlighted cross-references between bodies and houses. Gell (1998) provides a useful context for the exploration of bodily entanglements between the craftswomen and the old houses in Viștea. Exploring the relationships between the person and material culture, Gell argued that:

a person and a person's mind ... consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces and leavings, which can be attributed to a person and which, in aggregate, testify to agency and patienthood during a biographical career which may, indeed, prolong itself long after biological death (Gell 1998: 222–23).

For Gell, material objects are immersed in a social-relational matrix with a capacity to act as social agents. In this context, I argue that the mastery of arranging textiles in the domestic sphere of the old house was acting on behalf of the makers. The virtuoso displays of Viștea were a materialization of personal qualities and rendered recognizable the craftswomen's personhood and status. As good workmanship was inscribed in the décor, the display served as a marker of social status and position among other women (Buchczyk 2014). Exhibiting homemade objects around the house was related to displaying the skills of the good housewife (*buna gospodina*) and the work

potential of the unmarried women. One of the stories about the use of interiors was of bachelors entering the household during the Christmas carol singing (*colinda*), when they were able to see the young girls at their homes showcasing the products of their labor. Crossing the threshold for that visit was a form of inspection of the quality of objects to judge the household management skills of the potential future wives. In this sense, the effect of the household display played a role in the creation of wider social relations; the outsiders were subject to the agency of the interior, enchanted by the skilled manufacture of the hangings and the opulent colorful displays of the rooms. By acting visually on the visitors, these assemblages were part of the ‘spread’ of the craftswomen outside the boundaries of their bodies. In Viștea, old domestic space was an anthropomorphization of work and status. These textiles and the craftsmanship of their displays acted as persons, took on the attributes of their makers, their skill and body of work. Thus, the bodies of interiors were embedded in the social production of the persons and acted as their materialized ambassadors.

When mama Live showed me around the houses, she mentioned that one could immediately notice that particular displays belonged to a good family. Within the local art production system (Gell 1998: 153), the ‘dressed room’ represented not only the individual woman as a home-maker, but also stood for the whole household. The system materialized in the assemblage of the old house represented relationships or kinship and status that constituted the social standing of the household (Kligman 1988, Posey 2005). The interiors were set out to captivate and create an impressive effect through their display, signifying the social position of the domestic group. In the context of the old house, objects were made with virtuosity of craftsmanship and accurate arrangement, generating a composite display that had an impact and performing vital functions in the life of the person and the community. Through the style of the interior assemblages and the objects

that were constitutive of these compositions, it was possible to explore the qualities of people that created them.

The walks in Viştea and Viştişoara demonstrated that old houses were spaces full of ambiguity. Visits to the dressed ruins resulted in unlocking abandoned domestic spaces and bringing forgotten objects out into the light. There was a sense of unease in revealing the old houses and their contents. On the one hand, for my guides, they evoked fond memories about the house owners, their neighbors and family members. Pieces of furniture, photographs and styles of fabric decorations were attached to life histories, stories of daily practice, ritual, historical events and memorable incidents. On the other hand, these objects and spaces were left to be forgotten. Although the discarded photographs, religious images, personalised objects and other contents of the houses elicited memories, this did not prevent their abandonment and neglect.

The ruin walks showed that at the point of the collection acquisition in Viştea, women dressed the house in an elaborate and systematic manner. Since then, however, these assemblages have been unmade and the houses have become undressed. Elsewhere, I discussed how the removal of textiles from the domestic interior was related to the changing notions of gendered personhood and value of textile skills (Buchczyk 2014). The following discussion focuses on Viştea's changing vernacular environment and the abandonment of elaborate displays. I will explore in more detail the local attitudes to these spaces today. In contrast to the curatorial view on the charming pastoral interiors, for Viştea residents the colors and textures of the old houses evoked bittersweet sentiments and materialized ambivalent approaches towards the past.

Undressing the house

The historical changes of the local house designs were recorded in a village monograph, compiled by a local historian. Șerban (1984) observed that vernacular architecture in Viștea evolved from the form of a wooden cottage, through a house made of wood and stone, a house with a porch (*privar*) to a contemporary brick house. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were around three hundred wooden houses in the village with only around twenty brick, stone or clay structures. In the 1930s, brick houses started to replace the cottages but in the 1950s the village dwellings were predominantly made of wood. As noted, the early renovations of wooden houses in the interwar period were made possible by funds provided by returning immigrants as well as small-scale trade such as revenue from orchards in the mountain valleys.

A major transformation of the domestic, however, took place under socialism. After the initial shock of the collectivization campaign (see Cartwright 2001, Dobrinu and Iordachi 2009, Kideckel 1993, Kligman and Verdery 2011), socialist industrialization provided new opportunities. The numerous factories springing up in the region marked an increase in salaried occupations and access to state shops. In Viștea, the most significant employer was the chemical plant in the neighboring city of Victoria (at the time called the Victory of Communism) and Făgăraș. Industrial jobs were locally perceived as beneficial and resulted in the modernization of domestic spaces in the district. The form of brick houses, developed under socialism, transformed spaces of everyday life and equipped the households with additional material culture. New houses gained modern kitchens, bathrooms and additional bedrooms. They were furnished with socialist cabinets, mass produced wall units or elaborate furniture made to order, according to the taste of the

owner. Increasingly, new building materials and household objects were available in the town shops.

Few people continued to keep one or two butterfly-type or *chindeu* fabrics above a wall image or a piece of ceramics but walls were otherwise naked (*perete goale*). A homemade blanket spread on the bed or a tablecloth were isolated cases of traditional decoration within a fully modernized space. For the residents of Viștea, decorative textiles were rejected as old (*batrânești*) [belonging to the elderly], evoking memories of unnecessary labor and undesirable in their new interiors (Buchczyk 2014). They were gradually replaced by industrially produced elements of interior decoration. In 2012, Viștea-based conceptions of the wooden cottage were strongly related to narratives of underdevelopment, aging, uncivilized simplicity and a backward livelihood. These ideas were deeply embedded in the processes of historical transformation in this area and the flow of ‘new’, ‘civilized’ material culture that transformed the community and meanings attached to ‘old’ objects.

The affective qualities of the domestic space were represented in the unmaking of household arrangements and the normative sentiments towards objects, their constellations and house surfaces. From a historical distance, houses without fabrics and handmade soft furnishings were perceived as more comfortable. As in numerous domestic settings, the newness and the hygiene of the domestic space, lack of dirt and dust, were narrated as part of normality and newly acquired modernity. Brick or concrete were building materials indicating a sense of progress. The atmosphere of new possibilities was narrated through the ‘naked interior’ of the home, its modern surfaces and life-enhancing appliances. The smooth surfaces of the new built environment were discussed as necessary

changes, helping people to move on. For several respondents, the industrial boom brought progress leading to comfort and enhancement of the quality of life.

By starting to work in industry in the 1950s, the villagers were able to construct a livelihood disconnected from the hardships of the past and ‘uncivilized toil’ of the peasant life (Buchczyk 2014). In this context, discussing the period of the 1950s was particularly interesting in evoking stories about the material transformations that occurred in the village. In Viştea, the socialist reforms resulted in significant changes in the domestic sphere similar to those explored in other socialist contexts (Humphrey 1974, Boym 1994, Buchli 1999). Historical changes are being continuously mediated through everyday acts of home-making. According to Clarke (2001):

The physical act of ‘decorating’ requires the household to draw on (or negate) both traditional and contemporary cultural, social, aesthetic and technical knowledge to varying degrees.

Ethnographies of home-decoration practices and the transformation of domesticity highlight the ways in which the process of home-making relates to the affective constructions of the past, present and future. Drazin’s (2002) research in northern Romania illustrated how modernity and order were linked to the space of the home and the sentiments around transformation through “a feeling of cleanliness”, connected to a “progressive and gradual reinterpretation of the past” (2002: 103). Øye (2007) explored the role of surfaces as ways of demonstrating sentiments about the historical changes in Germany, emphasizing the significance of non-styling. From a local perspective, the grey home surfaces of the East German respondents were not interpreted as uniform, conformist, sterile environments but organic processes of “the development of individual differences” (2007: 121).

I propose to consider the stripped down surfaces of Viștean houses in the context of local normative categories and stories of change. For the villagers, naked walls were a natural decorative scheme for the improved brick houses. New domestic interiors did not require clothes and, as residents of Vișteea moved out of their wooden cottages into new brick buildings, there was no need for the spectacle of virtuosity embodied by the interior decoration of the house. Rather than a romanticized, aesthetic dwelling full of folk art, as represented in the Romanian museum practice, they viewed these spaces as obsolete ruins. During elicitation sessions in Vișteea, the museum objects in the presented photographs were understood as belonging to a different space and time, locked away in the old house (*casa veche*). The voices collected in response to the Horniman Museum material and old houses in the village tell a story of a transforming perception of everyday material culture. Modernity entered the village and settled in the house. The past was reinterpreted through space of the house and the removal of bygone objects. Seen in this light, it is necessary to consider the Horniman Museum collection as linked to the process of riddance. The 1954 collector entered a community in the period when the villagers had already begun to empty their houses and reconstitute their material culture for the uncluttered space of modernity. It was an encounter situated in a particular moment that facilitated the intersecting agendas of the acquiring collector and the undressing villager. Just as the collector was rushing to acquire, the villager was trying to sell, often due to poverty or because of the changing attitude to the decorative rural interior.

Navigating chronotopes?

Gosden (2005) noted that in the studies of material culture,

periods of change are important in bringing out the relationships between people and their object worlds, looking at that strands of continuities in the requirements objects have of people, as well as the changes (2005: 193).

The investigation of the shifting materiality of the household and the local neglect of artefacts of the kind the museum collection represents, constitute frames of local evaluations of change. How do we however account on the different ways these objects and spaces are being represented in the curatorial and local narratives? In the last section, I want to focus on the contrasting views about interiors, home decoration and domesticity held by the curators and villagers. Rather than regarding these narratives as representations of the diverging discourses between the source community and museological paradigms, I will highlight their representational significance, in particular the ways in which they materialize time through space.

For Bakhtin, narratives are constructed within specific settings (spaces) that intersect with actions rendering certain spaces powerful materializations of the past. One of such spatiotemporal evocations is a Gothic castle, a place where:

The traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. And finally legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels.

The historicity of castle time has permitted it to play a rather important role in the development of the historical novel. (...) The organic cohesion of spatial and temporal aspects and categories in the castle (and its environs), the historical intensity of this chronotope, is what had determined its productivity as a source of images at different stages in the development of the historical novel. (1981: 246)

Bakhtin pointed to an important quality of saturated historicity of museum-like spaces. Using Bakhtinian theory, Clifford (1988) suggested that historical detail is to be situated in relationship to a chronotope, a fictional setting where “certain stories can take place” (1988: 236). The ruin of the old house became such setting, saturated with particular historicity and productive of specific types of narratives. During my fieldwork walks, the villagers were unlocking their old houses covered in cobwebs and overgrown with ivy and sharing stories emerging in the neglected space. This setting of household ruins acted as a chronotopic structure, a spatial situation enabling a particular type of account.

The ruins of *casa veche* contained a palimpsest of stories, from biographical narratives, family histories, memories of old ways of life, events and traces of people involved in the space and the arrangement of objects. Rather than analyzing the significance for evoking memories of kinship, relatedness and custom (Iuga 2010, Makovicky 2007, Pine 1996, Posey 2005) that coexisted within these stories, I will focus on the most prevalent narrative representing the process of unmaking everyday space. It is through an understanding of the narrative of discontinuity and riddance that we can grasp the local meanings of the house as well as the Viștean material held in museums.

Instead of discussing the bucolic features of traditional domestic space, I was presented with memories of stripping down and regenerating the interior, interlinked with the somewhat axiological transition from underdevelopment to modernity. González-Ruibal

(2005) highlighted similar attitudes towards ruined rural households in Spain. Just as in Galicia, the social function of these decaying ghost spaces of the old houses was related to erasure and forgetting the past. For González-Ruibal, the modern houses overshadowing the ruined cottages serve as particular type of monuments

They are laying the foundations for a new future in which no past exists—
perhaps they are monuments in the etymological sense: the advice (moneo)
about the past, guarding against it. (González-Ruibal 2005: 145).

Following Bakhtin, every chronotope constitutes an axiological sphere, endowing time and space with particular qualities and values. The mundane acts of remaking domestic space and rearranging objects symbolized the shifting perceptions of the spatial and material form of the house. The houses offered a narrative of escape from drudgery and hard times to the era of modern comfort. The old arrangement of objects evoked a plot of evolving domesticity and progressive stripping down. Just like the castle, the old house was “saturated through and through with a time that is historical in a narrow sense, that is the time of the historical past” (Bakhtin 1981: 245 - 246). At the end of the story told by the Vișteans, the houses could be locked away and left to dust and decomposition. In contrast to the curatorial plots, here was no nostalgia for the pastoral past or aesthetics of tasteful comfort.

Through the metaphor of the old domestic space, I illustrated how the home arrangement evokes contrasting narratives within the old house chronotope. The ambivalence of time-space structures in Viștea can be illustrated by the position of the village. It is situated between two spatialized temporalities: of the village of Draguș and the city of Victoria.

The first point of reference relates to the Arcadian museological chronotope and emblematic folk space. There is Draguș at a 4-kilometre distance, narrating the locality as the space of the rural present perfect and timeless material culture. Objects from Draguș and the surrounding areas, including Viștea, have long communicated encyclopedic and aesthetic understandings of the Romanian peasantry and Arcadian rural past. This space-time casts a spell: a charm of peasant aesthetics and pastoral national identity. This emblematic and pleasant location lured collectors and museum ethnographers in search of acquisitions. Located in close proximity to Draguș, Viștea has also become a collectors' destination to be documented and sourced for heritage uses. The village house occupied a central position in this chronotope and was often imagined as a pristine microcosm unspoiled by modernization.

A contrasting evocation comes to mind as one moves in the direction of the city of Victoria, the embodiment of history-as-progress. Taking a four-kilometre walk southwest, one enters the symbolic realization of the model socialist city. On the advent of its construction in the 1950s around the worker's colony of the "Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin" Sovrom³ chemical plant, it was the first workers' city without churches, based on the principles of socialist modernity and rational urban planning. The name of the city in the 1950s, the Victory of Communism, embodies the "socialist future-oriented chronotope" (Ssorin – Chaikov 2013), a space representing accelerated qualities of time and the peak of the teleological goals of communism. With the rapid rise of Victoria next door to the village, Viștea was exposed to the new narratives of quality of life with the socialist futurist visions of abundance and comfort (Buchczyk 2014, Crowley and Reid 2000, Kligman and Verdery 2011, Spînu 2013). In the 1950s, the pioneer of the Popular Republic of Romania provided new categories of everyday life, work and material culture. The space in which

Viştea is situated seems stretched between temporalities, positioned in the midst of the contrasting chronotopes of folkloric past and utopian future.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide a reassessment of a collection of domestic artefacts in the context of the old household and the museum. Moving through a series of spaces, I argued that objects needed to be understood in the diverse settings in which they were situated. This was demonstrated through an evocation of curatorial sentiments and local attitudes to the traditional domestic material culture and the composition of artefacts in the old house. Since the time of the museum collection acquisition in the 1950s, the vernacular material culture has been fundamentally reshaped. Accounting for this radical transformation is a necessary step in the understanding of the forces of making and acting on the everyday domestic environment.

Museums are not neutral vessels to be filled with objects. As Bell (2012) suggested, they are compilations of space and time that generate particular teleological narratives (Bell 2012). The responses collected during the photo elicitation encounter in the village suggested understandings that were in contrast with the folk art narrative. The local stories of the household displays present an alternative close-up view on the material culture within the spaces and times experienced by the community, offering the potential for a more insightful representation in the museum environment, one that takes note of both past enchantment and contemporary ruination. Understanding the time-spaces in which vernacular objects are being situated is a necessary step in constructing any future representations of the domestic in the museum setting.

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Notes:

¹ The main sociological monographic campaigns of the Gusti's Romanian Social Institute were conducted in Goicea Mare (1925), Rușețu (1926), Nerej (1927), Fundul Moldovei (1928), Drăguș (1929), Runcu (1930) and Cornova (1931) and through its photography and documentary films. circulated in press, academic conferences, publications of monographs, events organised in the villages, international and national exhibitions, the sociological fieldwork gained a significant public visibility and contributed to a specific image of the regions under study. (Rostas 2000: 85).

² The visual rhetoric of the 1939 exhibition presented a “rhetorically complex discourse” (Popescu 2011: 169), combining the modernist aspirations of the newly created Romanian state with interiors inspired by the folkloric style (ibid.: 172). In this pavilion, the modern shell protected the internal peasant soul.

³ Soviet- Romanian enterprise